

# Chapter 7

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## *Lessons Learned*

*When you build a thing you cannot merely build that thing in isolation, but must also repair the world about it, and within it... and the thing which you make takes its place in the web of nature.*

**-- Christopher Alexander<sup>1</sup>**



**Historic preservation on Suisun City's Main Street.** S. Buntin.

The successes of Suisun City and Tualatin Commons clearly demonstrate that redevelopment is a viable option for suburban downtowns attempting to implement a sustainable future, both locally and regionally. Yet there were a number of times when progress was nearly halted, when the communities almost gave up, and when barriers seemed insurmountable.

A logical question, then, is this: Is there a fixed formula for

ensuring successful redevelopment? Unfortunately, there is not. Each community's redevelopment effort must be as unique as the community itself. Certainly it must rest squarely on the backs of city leadership and staff. It must involve the community, at times almost exhaustively. It must forge relationships with developers who may fight against properties of sustainable redevelopment. It must step carefully through a maze of political processes and financial mechanisms. And it must be painfully patient yet delicately persistent.

While there is no cast-iron formula, however, a number of lessons can be learned. These lessons, and the experience of other redevelopment efforts, can then provide a series of basic steps--a methodology--which other suburban communities may utilize to redevelop based on their own circumstances. Just such a methodology is presented in the next chapter.

Lessons learned from Suisun City, Tualatin Commons, and the other redevelopment projects discussed briefly in Chapter 4 warrant discussion prior to presenting the methodology, however,

b e c a u s e t h e y



**High-density housing in Tualatin Commons.** S. Buntin.

are the basic building blocks of that methodology. They fall into four categories: the economic context, environmental context, social context, and political context.

## The Economic Context

*The process of redevelopment itself can be moderately expensive, or it can be very expensive.* But good physical redevelopment with staying power *will be* expensive, at least up front, and it often requires public investment in the form of funding to provide sustainable design. Suisun City invested nearly \$60 million to purchase property, improve infrastructure, clean and dredge the

channel, and implement a number of other activities that were mandatory for its efforts to succeed. Tualatin invested over \$9 million for purchase of property and construction. Similarly, Mizner Park cost \$6.5 million to improve the site and \$53 million for construction. Public improvements at RiverPlace totaled \$6 million, while land at Uptown District cost \$10.5 million and site improvement and construction cost another \$50 million.<sup>2</sup>

Though expensive, redevelopment is commonly less costly than new development, especially when buildings are reused: “The project may not have been feasible if it had required all new construction,” says a spokesperson for The Oliver Carr Company, developer of The Village at Shirlington.<sup>3</sup>

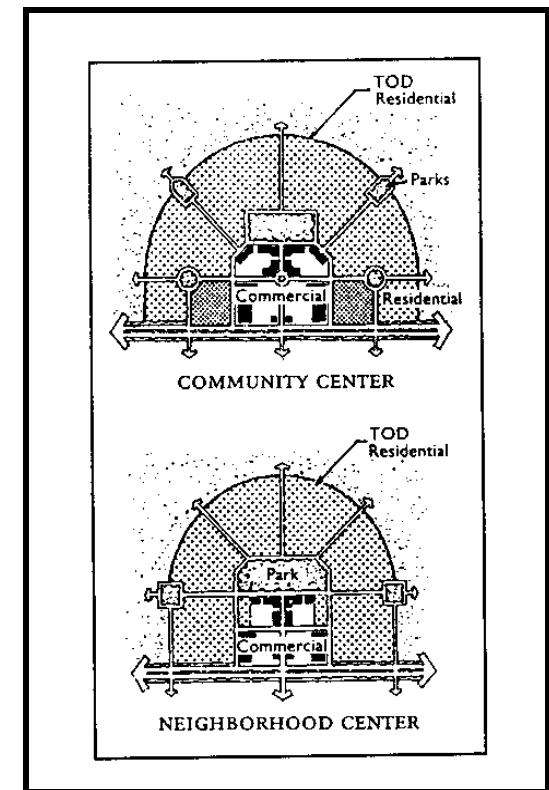
***Sustainable redevelopment long-term costs are considerably less than with typical sprawl development.*** They are less in two ways. First, the city can recoup large blocks of funding shortly after infrastructure improvement and site preparation by selling parcels to developers. Suisun City has been reimbursed for land it once owned by the developers of the Victorian Harbor neighborhood, as well as owners of individual pads in Harbor Plaza. As development continues, so will the direct economic return on its investment. Tualatin has received most of the nearly \$3 million projected from sales of the individual parcels surrounding the Lake of the Commons,

and is waiting for the last parcel to sell. Cities involved with RiverPlace, Mizner Park, and Uptown District all purchased land and have since been repaid through revenues from land sales and property and (in some cases) sales taxes, as well.

Second, a number of economic “rewards” to the suburb are seen over time as the redeveloped downtown matures. More quantifiable rewards include increased tax base for the city and increased business and employment opportunities for residents. Less quantifiable rewards include costs that would otherwise have to be paid for health care, environmental cleanup, building decay, traffic accidents, unemployment, and a host of other societal costs often ignored but certainly present as a result of typical sprawl development. For example, in Suisun City, redeveloping the Crescent neighborhood greatly reduced costs associated with police protection, while raising building levels at Tualatin Commons reduced costs resulting from recent flooding.<sup>4</sup> While many of these benefits may be difficult if not impossible to calculate, in the long run they deserve consideration.

*While the community can use a number of financing mechanisms, tax increment financing appears to be the most appropriate because it allows the suburb to issue bonds and pay them off based on increased tax income from redevelopment projects.* Suisun City

issued \$58 million in bonds, using the entire city as its tax increment base. Though such large boundaries can make it difficult to meet other increased expenses for new development elsewhere in the city, it may be necessary for cities that require rejuvenation as urgently as Suisun City initially did. While Tualatin did not issue bonds in the construction of



**Transit-oriented development schemes.**  
P. Calthorpe.

Tualatin Commons itself, it did issue them previously to fund much of the property purchase. Mizner Park and RiverPlace also used tax increment financing. The Crossings and The Village at Shirlington, however, used conventional construction loans secured by private developers.<sup>5</sup> Tax increment financing appears to provide a viable mechanism for paying back the bonds plus interest when based on sound redevelopment principles, especially with large-scale public land ownership or when conventional loans are not available or adequate.

*There are a number of federal and state funds--through grants and loans--available to facilitate redevelopment, and these should be sought out and then utilized when possible.* Because California has a law authorizing funding to cities redeveloping mass transit facilities, Suisun City was able to renovate its train depot while Mountain View can move its CalTrain station by using state funding. Tualatin received a grant from a regional entity to hire a public arts consultant to develop and implement the plan for public art at the Commons. Without such grants, the cities would have had to foot the bills themselves.

*Individual business owners--especially those of a unique and/or local nature--are likely to need financial and other incentives provided by the suburb to ensure they can sustain*

*themselves during the disruption of normal business operations that redevelopment is likely to cause. Additionally, developers are likely to need incentives because their perceived risk is high.*

Suisun City offers an extensive enterprise zone program to bring small businesses into the waterfront and Main Street improvement areas. Tualatin's incentives to developers include a streamlined public approvals process, an allowance for developers to wait to pay for parcels until the design process is complete, and--as with Suisun City--provision of all necessary infrastructure. Businesses were largely not disrupted, however, in the redevelopment of shopping centers at Mizner Park, The Crossings, and Uptown District because the malls were vacant, or nearly so.

## The Environmental Context

*Protection, restoration, and enhancement of the natural environment is essential in re-establishing the community's identity and in bringing people back to its center.* Not only did removing the oil storage tanks, cleaning the contaminated soil, and dredging Suisun Channel provide a healthy place along the waterfront in Suisun City, it also provided a symbolic step that said to citizens: Get reacquainted with your natural environment, from which the city itself has grown. Portland's efforts in RiverPlace were even more

deliberate, as its *Central City Plan* specifically calls for development that enhances the river's edge and brings people back to the water.<sup>6</sup>

Where a natural environmental amenity is not already onsite, as in Tualatin, The Crossings, Mizner Park, The Village at Shirlington, and Uptown District, restoring at least part of the environment through new areas of landscaping and porous surfaces provides a more natural environment that is aesthetically pleasing and beneficial to wildlife, while offering the opportunity for residents to experience nature on a regular basis.

*Environmental preservation often results in positive but previously unforeseen consequences.* In working with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers to develop an environmentally beneficial process for disposing of dredge materials, for example, Suisun City discovered a new way to create additional wetlands. Tualatin's construction of the lake not only created an amenity that increased real estate values and social and recreational opportunities, it also provided fill for the surrounding sites while eliminating two acres of paved, impervious streets. The removal of the freeway at the site of what is now RiverPlace not only reduced traffic and its associated ills and allowed for restoration of a portion of the Willamette River, it also resulted in a park that hosts some of Portland's largest festivals, including Jazz on the Water and the Blues Festival.<sup>7</sup>

*Good physical planning and architectural detail that are pedestrian-scaled are imperative for getting people out of their automobiles.* Relegating garages to alleys while providing wide streets, front porches, street furniture, and landscaping--giving people something worth looking at and that is comfortable and safe--results in much pedestrian activity at The

Crossings, Uptown District, and Suisun City's Victorian Harbor. Likewise, providing the lake as a central focal point with a wide promenade and attention to details in the wave-like railing and other amenities brings people to Tualatin's new downtown core, while the esplanade at RiverPlace and the linear plaza at Mizner Park do the same for residents of Portland and Boca Raton, respectively. In fact, Mizner Park "has transformed downtown into a social, cultural, and economic center... a place that people converge upon to shop, eat,

*You are on the right track when your solution for one problem accidentally solves several others. You decide to minimize automobile use to conserve fossil fuels, for example, and realize this will reduce noise, conserve land by minimizing streets and parking, multiply opportunities for social contact, beautify the neighborhood, and make it safer for children.*

**Michael Corbett**  
*Developer<sup>8</sup>*

relax, or be entertained... a place where people live, work, and play,” says a local planning expert.<sup>9</sup> People desire some place to go, but it must make them *want* to go there in the first place.

*The preservation and/or reuse of buildings to maintain a link to the suburb’s past fosters a sense of community and provides intrinsic character to downtown, but not all buildings are worth saving.* For Suisun City, there was no question that preservation of



**Mass transit in Suisun City.** S. Buntin.

unique historic structures such as the train depot and many of the

buildings in Old Town and along Main Street added immensely to the downtown and, indeed, the entire region. For The Village at Shirlington, adaptive building reuse enabled the developer to save structures and building materials relevant to the community. For Tualatin, The Crossings, and Uptown District, however, the buildings had no significant historic relevance, and in developing a completely new downtown center were entirely removed, though salvaged and recycled where possible. Sometimes starting from scratch is the best redevelopment approach.

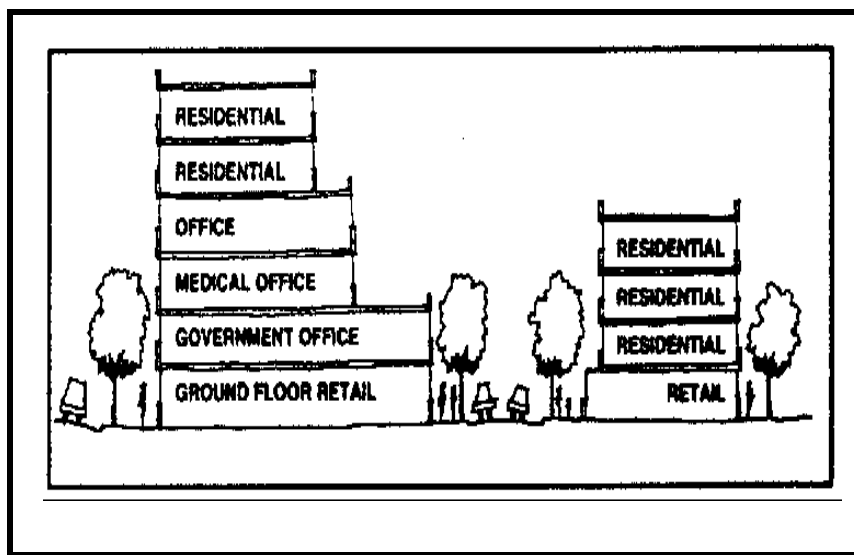
## The Social Context

*Even though the physical design is inviting and public spaces are made readily available, citizens may need to be urged to use the new spaces and to get in the habit of using them.* While both Suisun City’s redeveloped downtown and Tualatin Commons host a number of well-attended festivals, use during other times is not as high as city staffs and local businesses would like. Marketing and other efforts are necessary even for local residents, who are not yet accustomed to regularly frequenting the redeveloped area.

In Mizner Park and RiverPlace, however, success is attained year round, though retail in RiverPlace is not as successful as hoped primarily because parking spaces are limited and accessible mass transit is not yet onsite.<sup>10</sup> These projects find overall success because

they incorporate primary activities that draw people in: employment, cinemas, and other uses which also promote impulse shopping at local boutique shops.<sup>11</sup> Additionally, onsite grocery stores can be large draws, such as at The Village at Shirlington and Uptown District, where there is a constant mix of people.

*Providing housing as part of the redevelopment--especially in a variety of forms and costs--helps to create 24-hour-per-day*



**Horizontally integrated land uses allow for higher densities while retaining livability.** New Jersey Transit.

*uses and the critical mass essential for supporting local businesses.*

Hotels achieve the same goals. Victorian Harbor's close proximity

to the waterfront and Main Street ensure that the businesses have a local "constituency" in Suisun City. The Villas on the Lake and Tualatin Mews, as well as the Century Hotel, do the same at Tualatin Commons. Additionally, affordable housing is provided in Suisun City, The Crossings, RiverPlace, and Uptown District, enabling residents of all incomes to participate in neighborhood activities.

*The use of public art and recognizable symbols provide a sense of place, working to bring citizens and visitors alike back to the redevelopment again and again.* It's no mistake that Tualatin and San Diego, for Uptown District, emphasize public art so much, especially the development of a logo by an artist. The results of those efforts are not only aesthetic--though that of course is a main objective--they are also symbolic and even emotional. They serve the role of both marketing and allegiance--they help give the project identity.

And it doesn't necessarily need to be art. In Suisun City's case, the new Civic Center and one or two especially notable historic structures along Main Street serve as symbols. For Mizner Park and RiverPlace, it's the linear plaza, and esplanade and riverfront, respectively. When shown those in a photograph, just about anyone who has been to the locations will know where they are, that the places have their own identities.



*Recreation and entertainment are among the most popular and successful new redevelopment uses.* Suisun City's marina is near capacity, while the paths rambling through the natural Waterfront Park and along Suisun Marsh are well-used. In Tualatin Commons, the seasonal paddle boat vendor has been very successful, and radio-controlled boats can be seen gliding across the lake on a regular basis. Additionally, Tualatin Commons openly promotes a relationship between a nearby movie theater, while a number of entertainment efforts are under development in Suisun City, including a performing arts theater and an entertainment boat with card club. Successful uses at Mizner Park include a cineplex and amphitheater, while at RiverPlace include adjacent parks and the marina.

*Central open spaces, such as Suisun City's town plaza and promenade, the promenade and plazas surrounding the Lake of the Commons in Tualatin, the river and esplanade at RiverPlace, The Village at Shirlington's "Main Street," and Mizner Park's linear plaza, attract a diversity of users.* They thus succeed in providing usable and comfortable spaces for social interaction where



**Social interaction at Tualatin Commons.** R. Shelton.

people can just be (without being forced to buy something, even when the opportunity is still there).

## The Political Context

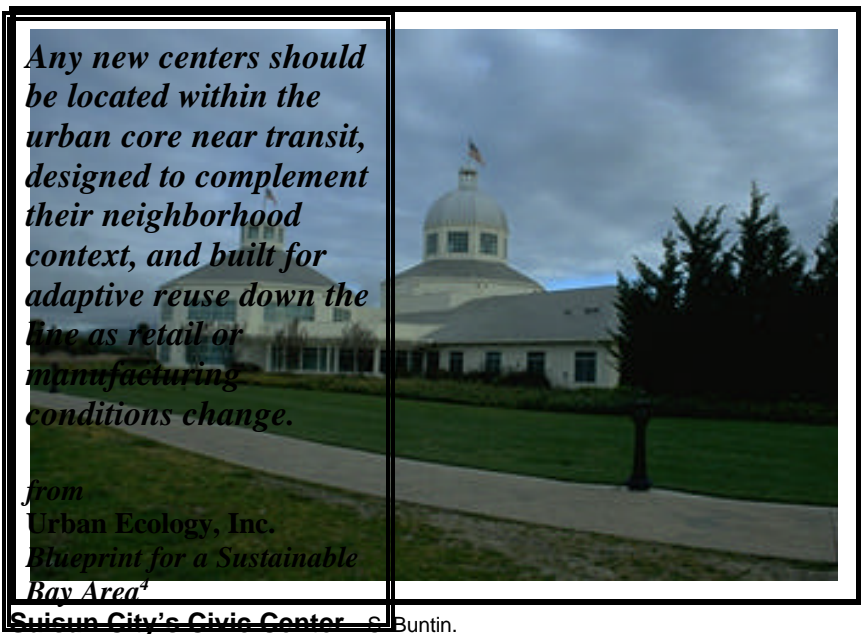
*Large-scale, downtown redevelopment appears to work best when the city takes an active role as public developer.* Both Suisun City and Tualatin negotiated with developers in an attempt to find one willing to undertake redevelopment of the entire area. When none were willing, the cities took a proactive and even aggressive role in purchasing property, improving infrastructure, and preparing sites. But they went beyond that, as well, by marketing the projects, offering incentives to developers to purchase individual parcels,

working diligently with community members, and taking control of the entire process. At Mizner Park and RiverPlace, active public participation--with one or two developers, respectively--had similar successful results.

Cities take such a large stake in these redevelopment efforts both because they are concerned about their future, and because their cores are comprised of civic spaces, physical as well as symbolic. The approach has allowed the cities and their residents to have more of a say in the way the redevelopment has turned out, and to wait--often patiently, sometimes painfully--to ensure they get the best proposal and developer for each parcel.

Additionally, smaller-scale projects, including The Crossings and The Village at Shirlington, can succeed with a reduced public development role, and generally with only one developer for the entire site. The larger and more complex the redevelopment area becomes, however, the less likely and less wise that becomes.

***Strong city leadership in the form of an elected champion such as a mayor or city council, as well as skilled and committed staff, are essential to achieving success.*** The process for redeveloping land--for changing the status quo based on an idea of what is sustainable--is indeed risky political business. Yet without an elected representative or body of representatives who have the



authority to say yes or no, the project can become too easily sidetracked or defeated. In Suisun City, Mayor Jim Spering risked his political reputation on redevelopment by basing his election campaign on the theme, while Mayor Steve Stolze in Tualatin did much the same. Additionally, skilled, committed, and experienced staff--Camran Nojoomi in Suisun City and Janet Young in Tualatin--adequately prepared the numbers, met with citizens, and negotiated with developers and other governmental agencies. Effective coordination and communication skills, unbreakable vision, and thick

skin are all prerequisites for the job.

*Similarly, citizen support and commitment help ensure success.* Beyond the normal city council hearings and public meetings, an active citizens group that itself champions the project will help silence the opposition while providing valuable volunteer time, serving well as a group to bounce ideas off of, and perhaps even acting in a fundraising role. Tualatin Futures formed about the same time that the Tualatin Commons preliminary plan was developed, and helped greatly in muting the opposition. Though no such group formed in Suisun City or the other projects, a core group of business owners and other concerned citizens were active in following the process and providing input.

*Additionally, a structured committee above and beyond self-forming citizens' groups can play a vital role by representing overall community interests.* Suisun City, through its 12-member Citizens Advisory Committee; Tualatin, through the Urban Renewal Advisory Committee; and Uptown District, through a Blue Ribbon Committee comprised of citizens, business representatives, city officials, and urban designers, worked closely with the groups in creating their redevelopment plans.<sup>13</sup>

*Redevelopment projects will inevitably face opposition in one form or another.* In Suisun City's case, the opposition came

from residents who were concerned about a number of issues, including the appropriate role of a public agency in redeveloping the downtown. In Tualatin, opposition developed over the fact that the site was using the expenditure of public funds, as well as others. Mountain View also faced opposition for The Crossings, which neighboring residents believed would be too dense. Dedication to overcoming opposition, and perhaps a plan for doing so, are necessary to succeed.

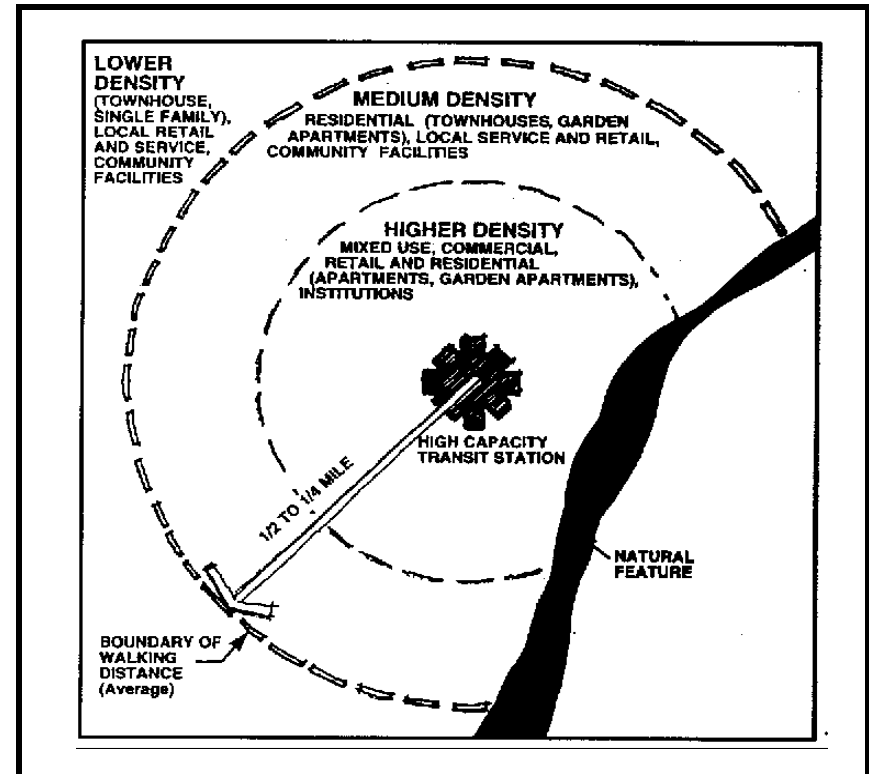
*A key to success seems to be the retention of a good design consultant or team to develop a site plan, conduct and coordinate other aspects of redevelopment such as market analyses, traffic studies, and environmental studies, and provide the technical expertise necessary in a major (or minor) redevelopment project.*

Suisun City retained the Roma Design Group of San Francisco to develop a conceptual site plan, architectural drawings, and a number of other necessary links in the redevelopment chain. The Leland Group of Portland and Denver headed the design team that created Tualatin Commons, and worked closely on much of the redevelopment process, especially preliminary studies. RTKL Associates of Baltimore was retained to develop the "Main Street" approach and other site design aspects of The Village at Shirlington. And Calthorpe Associates of Berkeley, California, was hired to create

a neotraditional, transit-oriented site plan for The Crossings.

*A comprehensive redevelopment must have goals, as well as two plans.* The first plan is the city's specific or redevelopment plan, which includes such things as legal description of the property, design guidelines, land use, time frames, and the like. It should--and perhaps legally must--tie into the city's overall general or comprehensive plan and zoning ordinances, undoubtedly modifying those. The second is the graphical plan of the site itself, which shows the actual site with parcels, buildings, streets, parking lots and structures, natural amenities, and others.

Goals are essential for defining both why the suburb wants to redevelop its downtown, and what such a redevelopment should accomplish. Suisun City's *Specific Plan* identifies goals, while a list of ten citizens' objectives was developed in addition to Tualatin's *Urban Renewable Plan*. The respective design consultant or team helped create the site plans for the cities, with input from citizens.



**Density should generally decrease with distance from the transit or other core facility.** New Jersey Transit.

Additionally, Portland's *Central City Plan* helped guide the development of RiverPlace, with such goals as to "coordinate development, provide aid and protection to Portland's citizens, and enhance the Central City's special natural, cultural, and aesthetic features."<sup>14</sup> Similarly, Mountain View's *San Antonio Station Precise*

*Plan* provided guidelines for The Crossings, setting goals of 30 units per acre residential density, mixed uses, onsite child care facilities, and others.<sup>15</sup>

Finally, redevelopment decisions are not made in a vacuum. *A suburb's downtown redevelopment has an impact on the region, and in fact this impact may be negatively felt by neighbors.* In Suisun City, for example, its neighboring city to the north, Fairfield, has been forced to reschedule its farmer's market and concert series because they cannot compete with Suisun City's. In Tualatin, office space in the first office building was leased at 100 percent prior to construction because it had the same lease rates as similar ones, yet offered the lake and promenade as amenities. Neighboring office buildings lost out. And in Boca Raton, Mizner Park's great success, especially economically, has made it a regional draw, taking customer base from regional shopping centers in nearby cities.

Despite these drawbacks, redevelopment greatly enhances opportunities for regional success of the metropolitan area if an overall regional growth management plan has been developed. Fundamentally, redeveloped downtowns promote regional self-reliance, community identity, green space, access for all citizens, and a host of other benefits.

Redevelopment is especially important for regions

experiencing rapid growth. "The reason the growth concept calls for a more compact urban form is that the region's population is growing rapidly," states Metro's *Region 2040* growth concept. "Without the growth concept, the region's... boundary would... [expand] enormously, resulting in sprawl and reduced livability."<sup>16</sup>

## Endnotes and References

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3. *Project Reference File: The Village at Shirlington*. Vol. 19, No. 20, October-December 1989. ULI - the Urban Land Institute: Washington, DC. Pg. 3.
4. Personal communication with Camran Nojoomi, City Manager, Suisun City, CA. March 3, 1997; and Janet Young, Economic Development Director, City of Tualatin, OR. March 4, 1997.
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## Lessons Learned

